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## **Eli Jackson Cemetery Pharr, Texas, 1973-2009**

Frances W. Isbell

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Fran Isbell  
October 14, 1982  
[REDACTED]

FOR TOURIST EDITION

A little white church behind the levee is last vestige of one of Hidalgo County's early river plantations, once renowned for its open door and practicing Christianity. Jackson Ranch Church was the nucleus for Methodist Churches in McAllen and Edinburg.

Jackson Ranch was founded in 1857 by Nathaniel Jackson who arrived with five covered wagons bringing his family and household goods from Alabama. Besides his wife Matilda, he had seven grown children and their families: Lucinda, Columbus, Eli, Matilda, Bryant, Martin and John.

Jackson purchased Porcion 71, consisting of 5535 acres, from lawyer-merchant E. D. Smith of Hidalgo, which was the only town in Hidalgo County at that time. His property had been granted to Narciso Cavazos, an "old settler" of Reynosa, by the King of Spain in 1767. Located five miles east of Hidalgo, it had a river frontage of 7/10s of a mile, and extended north thirteen miles between the present cities of Pharr and San Juan. Jackson paid 36 cents an acre.

Shortly after his arrival, Jackson built his ranch home, probably of adobe and thatch, beside the Old Military Road which ran from Brownsville to Hidalgo. A devout man, he instituted morning and evening Bible readings in his home, and regularly entertained itinerant Methodist missionaries from Brownsville.

He constructed an adobe and palm thatch chapel, forerunner of the wood frame structure which still stands. Services were conducted continuously throughout in the church / his lifetime, except during the Civil War, the drought of 1888 -1895, and for a brief period when Indian raids drove the ranchers to Brownsville. Semiannual or more frequent floods regularly destroyed the church and other ranch buildings, which were regularly rebuilt.

Respected for his kindness and charity, Nathaniel Jackson provided succor and refuge to all seekers, regardless of color, race or creed. During flood times, he took in his neighbors while the family went out in rowboats to rescue stranded livestock.

In the rich alluvial soil along the Rio Grande, the Jacksons grew pinto beans, yams, corn and sugar cane. They pastured cattle and sheep on drier lands north of the river. Surplus farm produce was sent to Davis Ranch (Rio Grande City) by oxcart or steamboat.

Nathaniel Jackson's sons built homes for their families on the ranch. Martin Jackson's home lay just across the stagecoach road from the church. His brother Eli, who was Hidalgo County commissioner 1890-1892, built about 500 feet east.

When the Civil War broke out, Jackson openly supported the federal cause. Although he was a Southerner, he stoutly opposed secession. He died in 1865.

Like his father, Martin Jackson was a religious man. According to his daughter, the late Mrs. Maynard Jackson Lopez of Donna, "He didn't like a lie, and would not take advantage of others." He excused his workmen early so they could prepare for evening services. Unlike some of his brothers, he tried to learn Spanish, so he could communicate with his neighbors.

Members of the Jackson family attended the little Methodist Church in Hidalgo, founded in 1874 by Rev. A. H. Suderland. They drove five miles in a horse and buggy each Sunday. Martin Jackson was a steward of the church.

When high water washed away the Hidalgo Church in 1883, the congregation met temporarily on higher ground at El Sauz Ranch, the home of Jackson's neighbors, the L. H. Box family. In 1884, Martin Jackson deeded an acre of ground north of the Old Military Road to the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. On this site, he built his church, which he called Jackson Church at El Capote, after the well-known ranch of his neighbor, Manuel de la Vina. Methodists met here for fifteen years.

People came from across the river in Mexico to attend services at Jackson Church. The original buildings, of logs, adobe and thatch, were periodically washed away.

When county sheriff John Closner began land development in the area around 1897, he bought some Jackson ranchlands at \$1.50 an acre, considered a good price at that time. When Closner set up a brick kiln on his San Juan Plantation in 1903, Martin Jackson rebuilt his church of brick.

When the disastrous flood of 1909 filled the church half full of water, the congregation removed to McAllen where they constructed their first Church of the Divine Redeemer in 1910. Some members went to other cities on higher ground where they also established churches.

Juan and Plutarco de la Vina founded El Buen Pastor Methodist Church at Edinburg in 1913. John Connally Kelly raised the first Methodist Church in Pharr about 1912.

Members who remained at the Jackson Church, rebuilt of wood about 1909 or 1910, were served by a circuit minister. The building also functioned as a ranch school. Two ranch cemeteries were established, one in the churchyard and another 500 feet east on Eli Jackson's land, where it is believed that the patriarch Nathaniel Jackson may be buried. Both cemeteries are still maintained by family members.

The little Jackson Church not only nurtured congregations in McAllen and Edinburg. It continued to serve its immediate neighborhood as a mission church.

According to family tradition, after the death of Martin Jackson in 1913, when the Methodist minister became too old to continue his circuit visits, church officials gave oral permission to the Board of Mexican Missions of the American Lutheran Church from San Juan to conduct services. From 1929 to at least 1941, they sent preachers regularly, reaching about 50 families with Sunday School and church services. The Lutherans installed a church bell, restored the building and held a number of youth conferences at the chapel.

From 1963 to 1967, lay preachers from La Trindiad Methodist Church in Pharr, non-denominational working in cooperation with the/American Sunday School Union, visited regularly.

In 1967, Hurricane Beulah left six feet of water standing in the church for about four weeks. After the flood, people moved to higher ground and the church was closed in 1968. The church organ was donated to Hidalgo County Historical Museum in 1968.

At the present time, much of the surrounding farmland is operated by large growers, and there is no community to sustain the church. It is still maintained as a family chapel by descendants of Martin Jackson.

The little church steeple is all that can be seen from the rerouted military road (now US 281). It peeks over the levee at its juncture with I Road, which Martin Jackson reputedly gave to the county because he wanted a straight road from his ranchhouse to the county seat.

This tiny church, which nurtured at least two other congregations, is <sup>one of</sup> ~~probably~~ the oldest Protestant structures still standing in the county.